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May 11, 2004

Dale Bosworth
Chief, Forest Service
Sidney R. Yates Federal Building
201 14th and Independence, S.W.
Washington, D.C. 20250

Dear Chief Bosworth:

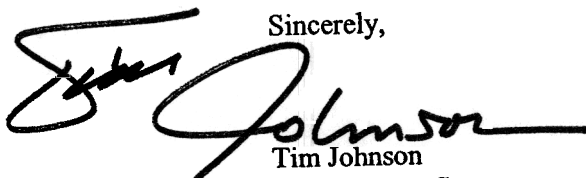
I am writing to you regarding your decision to forgo the use of large fixed-wing airtankers for wildfire suppression. Although I agree with your determination to ground these planes due to safety problems, I am concerned that the Forest Service does not have an adequate plan in place to replace the capability provided by these aircraft.

South Dakota and the Intermountain West face severe drought conditions and the outlook to the 2004 fire season is grim. The Black Hills area of South Dakota is a community of approximately 80,000 people surrounding and intermixed within the 1.2 million acre Black Hills National Forest (BHNF). In many instances entire communities in the Hills are surrounded by public forestlands - many of these lands are condition class II and III lands - the most susceptible to catastrophic forest fires. Furthermore, in the last five years approximately ten percent of the BHNF has burned, forcing partial evacuations of several communities; including Lead, Deadwood, and Keystone.

As a consequence of these conditions, last year, the Forest Service stationed a 2,450 gallon twin engine aircraft in Rapid City, S.D. in close proximity to the BHNF. In light of your decision to ground all heavy duty airtankers, the Black Hills will not have access to these crucial fire suppression tools. Therefore, I request that the Forest Service position a C-130 aircraft or comparable heavy airtanker at Rapid City as an effective preparatory step to quickly suppress wildfires. Heavy airtanker support can be crucial to prevent small fires from spreading into large conflagrations. During the 2002 Grizzly Gulch fire near the historic community of Deadwood nine airtankers were utilized to combat the fire.

Again, I agree with your determination to ground these aircraft to protect crews and the fire-fighters who put their lives on the line to protect our communities. In light of your decision, and because of the unique challenges facing the Black Hills, I request that you take the necessary steps to ensure an equivalent and acceptable aerial firefighting capability is present in the Black Hills this year.

Sincerely,



Tim Johnson
United States Senate